



## **CENTRAL OREGON VETERANS OUTREACH, INC.**

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June 27, 2007

Gordon H. Smith  
United States Senator  
Special Committee on Aging  
Washington, D.C. 20510-6400

RE: Veterans Mental Health Issues.

Dear Senator Smith:

I am pleased to provide testimony for the Special Committee on Aging hearing on veterans' mental health issues. I am a Vietnam veteran who has had to deal with this issue for many years and have a personal perspective that allows me to discuss this problem in detail. In addition, I have been a national service officer for Vietnam Veterans of America since 1978 and in that position have assisted hundreds of veterans in claims for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs that often involve mental health issues, particularly claims for combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder. Finally, directly related to veterans' mental health issues is the problem of alcoholism and substance abuse that is often secondary to the primary mental illness diagnosis.

I served in the US Army from 1966 until 1971 and was in Vietnam from August 29, 1968, until March 23, 1970. I was an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist—the bomb squad—and saw a lot of combat. I was wounded twice and decorated for heroism in ground combat. I was first diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 1993 by the VA after many years of dealing with things I didn't understand. I want to say that many people believe that everyone diagnosed with this disorder is incapable of functioning and this is simply not true. It is unfortunate that this is a myth foisted upon the American public by media reports of a few sensational cases that leave people with the impression that this is the way it is with all of us diagnosed with PTSD. In my own case, despite my symptoms—startle response, hypervigilance, a sleep disorder, intrusive thoughts about the war, substance abuse and alcoholism, two failed marriages, anger issues—I managed to get a college degree, a law degree and an advanced law degree. I was a graduate teaching fellow at the Georgetown University Law Center, a successful criminal defense attorney and then an equally successful capital defense investigator for the Oregon Capital Defenders.

In 2002, my PTSD symptoms finally got to a point where I was almost unable to function, either in the workplace or in social settings and I had to give up a job that I loved. I am now rated by the VA as being totally disabled by PTSD and several physical problems related to being wounded and being exposed to herbicides. I was 55 when this happened and I have learned that I am not alone in this regard. Because of my involvement in a PTSD group at the VA's Bend Community-Based Outpatient Clinic I learned that a number of older veterans—most of whom served in Vietnam—found themselves finally having to deal with their issues related to the war late in life. I cannot tell you precisely why this is, but in my own case it was as simple as approaching the age of 60 and not wanting to live the rest of my life having this illness interfere with virtually